

Students honor lives they knew in death

By Jacqueline Reis TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

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SHREWSBURY- Seventy-one people who donated their bodies to science were remembered Saturday by a unique crowd. Some of those gathered knew the deceased in life; others were acquainted with them only in death.

Friends and family of the donors who came to the Hoagland-Pincus Conference Center, operated by University of Massachusetts Medical School, remembered their loved ones for their spirit, their cooking, their gardens, and their many gifts.

But 100 first-year medical students who hosted the event remembered the deceased for their hands, their veins and the minutiae of their bodies, which were donated to the school through its Anatomical Gifts Program.

The gifts program at the medical school provides cadavers that first-year medical students work with from August to December. Afterward, the bodies are cremated unless families request the person's remains.

The strangeness of saying goodbye to someone whose insides you know intimately and whose soul you know not at all may have been best captured by Teri Kleinberg, whose letter to the body she worked on was read at the memorial. She named the body Hank, because she never knew the donor's real name.

"To think that I am probably the only person in the world to recognize you by a blood vessel - and not by your strong chin, your blue eyes clouded with age, your dignified brow - is a rare feeling indeed," she wrote. "I got to see inside that massive chest, to hold the heart that beat over 2.7 billion times during your life. ... Thank you for lending yourself to me for a little while. You will always be my gold standard when I think about how a person should be put together."

Each medical school class in the state holds a similar memorial once a year for donors, but not every school invites the donors' families. For Saturday's event, families submitted photos and remembrances of their loved ones, which the students spliced into a slide show of smiling faces and succinct descriptions, such as, "He delighted in the symphonies of Mahler and Beethoven and cooked perfect chicken."

Paul D. Womer of Brunswick, Maine, whose mother was celebrated at this year's memorial and whose father was part of the program two years earlier, said he was impressed by the students' compassion. "It wasn't just a science class. It was much more personal to them," he said.

Dr. Moira C. Pfeifer of Springboro, Ohio, attended yesterday's memorial to remember her father, a New York City Fire Department battalion chief. She went to the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences and said, "He told me that I had learned so much from my anatomy lab that he wanted to do the same thing for somebody else."

Donors come from all walks of life, including doctors, lawyers and legislators, said Dianne M. Person, chief administrator for the Anatomical Gift Program. Most do it for altruistic reasons, though a small percentage of donors plan to donate because they cannot afford a typical funeral. Many times couples both decide to donate, she said. The median age of donors is about 70, but people in their 20s and 30s occasionally sign up, too, she said.

Donors must be at least 18 at the time of death, not suffer from an infectious disease that would put anyone working on them at risk, and not be extremely emaciated or morbidly obese. Very few people are turned away. If the school has enough donors for its own class, it shares with the other medical schools in the state: Harvard, Tufts and Boston universities.

The Anatomical Gift Program maintains and distributes body donations to support a broad spectrum of educational and clinical research missions of the school. The program supports these activities in various departments, including the education of undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate students by preparing organs, tissues and cells for these purposes.

For more information on donating, call Ms. Person at (508) 856-2460 or write to the Anatomical Gift Program, 55 Lake Avenue North, Worcester, MA 01655.